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Dephasing India's Look East/Act East Policy

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India's "Look East" policy was launched in the early 1990s as part of a concerted effort to elevate the strategic importance of Southeast Asia in the country's foreign policy agenda. The policy has been described as going through various phases, with an accelerated pace and process of interaction in moving from one phase to the next, marked by a broadening and deepening of India's interaction with the region. This has culminated in the most recent "phase" under the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, which has rebranded the policy as "Act East" to signify a more pro-active and action-oriented approach towards the region. However, has there been any real and substantive change in India's engagement with Southeast Asia in moving from one "phase" to the next? Does this narrative of phases in India's post-Cold War engagement with Southeast Asia hold any substance? This article deconstructs the narrative of phases in India's Look East and now Act East policy and argues that India's eastward engagement has not been a process of simple linear progression. As such, while the concept of phases in India's Look East policy serves as a useful narrative device, it does not capture the nuances of India's post-Cold War re-engagement with Southeast Asia, which has been far more complex than this narrative suggests.

Keywords: Indian foreign policy, Look East, Act East, Southeast Asia, ASEAN.

The year 2017 marks 25 years of dialogue partnership, 15 years of summit-level

relations and five years of strategic partnership between India and ASEAN. The relationship between India and Southeast Asia has come a long way from the days of mutual mistrust rooted in concerns over India's naval ambitions in the 1980s;¹ New Delhi's support for Vietnam following its invasion of Kampuchea (Cambodia) in 1978 and recognition of the Heng Samrin regime in 1980;² and Indian perceptions of ASEAN as "an instrument of neo-colonialism and a reincarnation of SEATO [South-East Asia Treaty Organization]" following its creation in 1967.³ Undoubtedly, India's economic interactions, institutional linkages and security cooperation with Southeast Asian countries have grown in leaps and bounds in the post-Cold War period.

The "Look East" policy, which was launched in the early 1990s to reengage with Southeast Asia, has been characterized by Indian scholars and policymakers as evolving through various "phases", with an accelerated pace and process of interaction in moving from one phase to the next.⁴ This has been marked by a broadening and deepening of India's engagement with the region: broadening as the policy has expanded beyond its initial geographic focus on Southeast Asia to encapsulate the broader East Asia and now Indo-Pacific region; and deepening to expand beyond its initial focus on economic integration towards greater political interaction and security cooperation. This has culminated in the most recent "phase" under Prime Minister Narendra Modi who assumed power in 2014 and rebranded the policy as "Act East" to signify a shift towards a more pro-active and action-oriented approach to the region.⁵

However, is the recently rebranded Act East policy real? In other words, has there been any real and substantive change in India's engagement with Southeast Asia under its most recent "phase"? More broadly, does the narrative of phases in India's post-Cold War engagement with Southeast Asia hold any credence? One could argue that the various phases of the Look East policy are rooted in domestic political rhetoric rather than foreign policy shifts as new governments have sought to differentiate their policymaking approach from previous administrations. Notably, the first phase corresponds with the Congress (Indian National Congress) government of Prime Minister Narasimha Rao that came to power in 1991, while the second phase was unveiled by the Atal Bihari Vajpayee-led BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) government in the early 2000s after it assumed power in 1998-99 and continued under the Congress government of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in

2004. Finally, the rebranded Act East policy emerged under the BJP government of Narendra Modi in 2014. Thus, each so-called phase of the Look East policy can be regarded as a mere rebranding exercise as new governments seek to rhetorically distinguish themselves from their predecessors.

This article separates rhetoric from reality by seeking empirical evidence of the various phases of India's Look East/Act East policy. In doing so, it seeks to validate the basis for the evolution of India's post-Cold War engagement with Southeast Asia. In deconstructing the narrative of phases, the article argues that India's relationship with Southeast Asia has not been a process of simple linear development. Rather, exogenous factors such as the 1997-99 Asian Financial Crisis (AFC) and India's nuclear tests in 1998 have contributed to a non-linear progression in India's eastward engagement. In this context, India's Look East policy has been subject to peaks and troughs with some elements of the so-called later phases—such as the expanding geographic scope of the policy and focus on security cooperation—evident from the very inception of the policy while other elements—such as the expanded Indo-Pacific orientation under the current Act East policy—remain a work in progress. This alludes to the fact that much of the rhetoric regarding the Look East policy is aspirational rather than reflecting the reality of India's post-Cold War engagement with Southeast Asia.

As such, while the concept of phases in India's Look East policy serves as a useful narrative device, it does not capture the nuances of India's post-Cold War re-engagement with Southeast Asia, which has been far more complex than this narrative suggests. In other words, although there is some evidence to posit a qualitative change between the various so-called phases of the Look East policy, the narrative of distinct phases is not as definite and clear-cut as the literature represents it to be. After a brief overview on the origins of the Look East policy, this article first identifies and then challenges the basis for the various phases of the policy, culminating in the most recent Act East policy under the Modi administration.

Launching Look East

India launched its Look East policy in the early 1990s as part of a concerted effort to elevate the strategic importance of Southeast Asia in the country's foreign policy

agenda.⁶ What distinguished India's post-Cold War re-engagement with Southeast Asia from previous periods of engagement was the fact that it was operating on multiple fronts by complementing the country's longstanding historical, cultural and ideological links with the region with growing economic interdependence, political engagement and shared security interests. In this context, the Look East policy was seen as a "recalibration rather than a reincarnation" of India's engagement with Southeast Asia, which placed greater emphasis on substantive engagement over rhetorical claims of "third world solidarity".⁷

Although there is some dispute over the exact origins of the policy, the establishment of India's sectoral dialogue status with ASEAN in 1992 is most frequently cited as the start of the policy. The policy itself was enunciated during a speech by Indian Prime Minister Narasimha Rao during a visit to Singapore in 1994 when he called for "forging a new relationship" with the region.⁸ In its annual report in 1992-93, the Indian Ministry of External Affairs noted that "India has decided to give a special policy thrust to its relations with the ASEAN", although the term "Look East Policy" was first mentioned in the 1995-96 report.⁹ However, a precursor to the policy, known as the "Look East Destiny" was unveiled in the 1980s.¹⁰

At a bureaucratic level, Southeast Asia's increased importance in India's foreign policy priorities was reflected in relations with ASEAN being elevated from the Secretary (East) to the Foreign Secretary-level in 1992 and the Economic Cell of the Ministry of External Affairs identifying ASEAN as one of its "thrust regions".¹¹ This came amid a broader reorientation of India's foreign policymaking process with greater emphasis on its economic dimension, which was facilitated by the creation of the Economic Division as a separate cell within the Ministry of External Affairs. In this context, despite being launched by Rao's Congress government, the Look East policy maintained a non-partisan consensus as it became institutionalized in the country's foreign policy architecture.¹²

Externally, Singapore played a prominent role in facilitating New Delhi's renewed engagement with Southeast Asia by serving as a key proponent of India's sectoral partner and later dialogue partner status with ASEAN.¹³ The expansion of ASEAN in the 1990s through granting membership to the CLMV countries (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam) gave impetus to deepening India's bond with ASEAN, given the geographic proximity of these countries to India. Notably, Vietnam's entry into ASEAN in 1995 turned India's longstanding relationship with

that country from a source of mistrust in the India-ASEAN relationship into a source of strength. Myanmar also occupies a special place in the evolution of India's Look East policy given the country's geostrategic position at the crossroads of South and Southeast Asia.¹⁴ Indonesia and Malaysia are also important partners for India in the region: Indonesia as the region's largest country that straddles the Indian Ocean and South China Sea; and Malaysia as the initial advocate for India's dialogue partnership with ASEAN in the 1970s.¹⁵

From Phase One to Phase Two

Several policymakers and scholars have drawn the distinction between the first "phase" or decade of India's Look East policy in the 1990s—which was characterized by growing trade and investment relations with Southeast Asia—and the second "phase" or decade that followed in the 2000s when India's engagement with the region gained momentum amid more institutionalized linkages across a wider region and broader agenda. The start of the ASEAN-India summit-level partnership in 2002 is generally regarded as the beginnings of phase two, with the conclusion of three key agreements at the 2003 Bali Summit—a Framework Agreement on Comprehensive Economic Cooperation; a Joint Declaration on Cooperation in Combatting International Terrorism; and India's accession to ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation—signifying India's deepening relationship with ASEAN at the economic, security and political levels, respectively.¹⁶

Elaborating on the so-called second phase of the Look East policy, Yashwant Sinha, India's former external affairs minister noted in 2003:

India's 'Look East' policy has now entered phase two. Phase one was focused primarily on ASEAN countries and on trade and investment linkages. Phase two is characterised by an expanded definition of 'East' extending from Australia to China and East Asia with ASEAN as its core. Phase two marks a shift from exclusively economic issues to economic and security issues.¹⁷

Amar Nath Ram, former secretary in the Ministry of External Affairs with responsibility for relations with Southeast Asia, echoes this characterization of a so-

called first and second phase, noting that that there was “little overt strategic or holistic content in this relationship” during the first phase of the India-ASEAN relationship when the “thrust” of India’s Look East policy was “largely confined to trade and economic relations with Southeast Asia”.¹⁸ Meanwhile, the second phase was characterized by “a clear consolidation and expansion of our links with the region to now encompass, among others, political, strategic, defence, economic, science and technology and cultural areas of cooperation”.¹⁹

Beyond official government discourse, India’s strategic thinkers have also embraced this narrative of a first and second phase in the Look East policy. For instance, Raja Mohan asserts that phase two of the policy placed an elevated importance on improving physical connectivity between India and Southeast Asia, with India’s northeast acquiring newfound importance as a land-bridge linking it to the markets of Southeast Asia.²⁰ This in turn will allow India to “break the artificial political barriers between the subcontinent and Southeast Asia” through a rediscovery of its “extended neighbourhood”.²¹

Thus, phase two of the Look East policy is characterized by a deepening and widening of India’s engagement with East Asia; deepening in the form of strengthening economic integration and moving beyond the economic dimensions of interaction towards strengthening political and security linkages, and widening by expanding the geographic scope of the policy beyond Southeast Asia to include the broader East Asian region, while maintaining ASEAN at the core of regional engagement. However, as the subsequent section demonstrates, this narrative paints an overly-simplistic and somewhat inaccurate picture of the evolution of the first two decades of the Look East policy.

Deconstructing the Phase One/Two Divide

The delineation between the first and second phases of the Look East policy is subject to several ambiguities and discrepancies. Notably, several aspects of the so-called second phase were already present from the early stages of the first phase. For one, claims that the strategic dimensions of the Look East policy only came to the fore during the second decade (or phase two) of the policy is belied by India’s institutional interactions during the first decade (or phase one). This includes India’s membership to several forums that maintained a distinct focus on security issues, including the

ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in 1996, associate and subsequent full membership of the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific (CSCAP) in 1994 and 2000 respectively, the start of the ASEAN-India Senior Officials Meetings in 1998 and observer status at the Western Pacific Naval Symposium the same year. Even the decision to add science and technology as an additional item in the sectoral dialogue agenda meeting in 1994 was premised on the desire to “add political significance to India’s association with ASEAN” as this area, according to India’s then Foreign Secretary J.N. Dixit, “impinged on defence and security issues”.²²

Moreover, there is also evidence that strategic compulsions preceded economic pressures in driving the launch of the Look East policy. Notably, the need to quell underlying mistrust in the India-ASEAN relationship rooted in India’s close relationship with Vietnam and the Soviet Union, and concerns over India’s naval modernization programme and hegemonic ambitions in South Asia predated India’s economic liberalization reforms that followed the disintegration of the Soviet Union and foreign exchange crisis in 1991. As G.V.C. Naidu notes, “Although Rao has been credited with the ‘Look East’ policy, one can trace the roots of the policy to the initiatives the Indian Navy took in the late 1980s to re-establish links with its counterparts in Southeast Asia... Economic exigencies and political compulsions later were added incentives to look at Southeast Asia afresh.”²³

In this context, economic and strategic engagements between India and ASEAN cannot be regarded as mutually exclusive domains but rather mutually reinforcing and interdependent arenas with “trade and interdependence... regarded as the midwives of security”.²⁴ This breaks down the narrative of a “deepening” of India’s interaction with ASEAN, marked by a shift from a purely economic and commercially-driven relationship during the first phase of the relationship to a more strategic (security and political)-driven relationship during the second phase.

Furthermore, the “widening” narrative of the second phase of India’s Look East policy is also open to a degree of scrutiny given that India’s engagement with the broader East Asian region was at the heart of the policy from its very inception. Notably, the origins of the policy can be traced to India’s rapprochement with China, which began with Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi’s visit to China in 1988, which one scholar has described as the “most important development with regard to India’s changing view of the East” and “key to India’s Look East policy”.²⁵ Some even claim that Japan was the initial target of the Look East policy, but that when Tokyo

did not reciprocate India's overtures, the policy was reoriented towards Southeast Asia.²⁶ There are even reports that Prime Minister Narasimha Rao first made reference to the Look East slogan during a visit to South Korea in 1993.²⁷ As former foreign secretary Kanwal Sibal noted in a 2003 speech, "India's Look-East policy starts from North East Asia and not simply the ASEAN region."²⁸ The fact that Prime Minister Narasimha Rao's seminal Singapore lecture of 1994 was titled "India and the Asia-Pacific: A New Relationship" illustrates that the policy entailed engagement with the wider region from its very inception.²⁹

Additionally, the concept of a first and second phase in India's relations with Southeast Asia overlooks the fact that the evolution of India's engagement with the region was by no means a linear progression. Notably, during the late 1990s there was a distinct loss of momentum in India's relationship with ASEAN as the AFC and backlash against India's nuclear tests in May 1998 derailed some of the progress that had been achieved. With respect to India's five nuclear tests during 11-13 May 1998, the Fifth ARF meeting and ASEAN Annual Ministerial Meeting in Manila in July 1998 was the first forum where India faced the wrath of the international community.³⁰ India's nuclear tests, as well as the subsequent deterioration in relations with Pakistan following the 1999 Kargil Crisis and mobilization of both countries' militaries following a string of terrorist attacks during 2001-04, renewed ASEAN's concerns about India-Pakistan tensions spilling over into the wider region.³¹

Ultimately, the adverse impact of India's nuclear tests on relations with ASEAN was relatively limited. As well as disagreements within ASEAN on how to respond to the tests, ASEAN's muted response was also facilitated by India's willingness to sign the protocol of the 1997 Treaty on the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapons-Free Zone (SEANWFZ), which helped generate goodwill for India among ASEAN member states.³² Moreover, ASEAN countries were more sympathetic to the geopolitical compulsions facing India (emanating from the nuclear capabilities of China and Pakistan) relative to the situation during the Cold War when India's military modernization was seen in more ominous terms by some countries in Southeast Asia.³³

However, the AFC left a more lasting impact on India's relations with ASEAN. The crisis slowed India's burgeoning economic relations with the region, as the devalued currencies of several Southeast Asian countries undermined the

competitiveness of Indian exports to the region.³⁴ Furthermore, the fact that India had been largely shielded from the crisis—due to its restrictions on capital account convertibility—demonstrated that its economy still remained relatively detached from regional supply chains and transnational production networks.³⁵ This contrasted with China’s financial support and role as buffer to the “contagion” effect of foreign capital outflows afflicting the region.³⁶

In the aftermath of the financial crisis there was a growing emphasis on strengthening economic linkages within the wider region.³⁷ This led to the emergence of regional economic initiatives such as the ASEAN+3 and Chiang Mai Initiative currency swap agreement in 1999 from which India was excluded. This would leave a lasting legacy for India’s Look East policy as it came to be perceived as a peripheral or secondary player relative to other regional powers—notably China, Japan and South Korea—in its engagement with ASEAN.³⁸

As such, India’s engagement with the region underwent a cyclical process with peaks and troughs. This is overlooked in the narrative of phases that portrays India’s relations with Southeast Asia as a simple linear progression that moves from strength-to-strength. Thus, coupled with the fact that strategic considerations and a broader East Asian and Asia-Pacific orientation were at the heart of the Look East policy from its very inception, these developments challenge the narrative of a first and second phase in that policy.

Justifying the Phase One/Two Divide

Despite these deficiencies, it is apparent that the pace of India’s interaction with ASEAN has gained momentum over time. The clearest demonstration of this is the acceleration of India’s trade with ASEAN from the first to the second decade of the policy. From 1990 to 2000, India-ASEAN trade grew by almost 200 per cent—from approximately US\$2.4 billion to US\$7.1 billion—while growing by more than 500 per cent from 2000 to 2010—to almost US\$44 billion.³⁹ Moreover, while there were sporadic developments in the political and security arenas, the first decade of the Look East policy was generally marked by interactions concentrated in the economic arena. Meanwhile, more diverse exchanges spanning the economic, political and security arenas marked the second decade or so-called second phase of the policy.

This came as India's engagement with ASEAN became more institutionalized, beginning with annual summit-level interactions in 2002, which was followed by India being admitted as a founding member of the East Asia Summit (EAS) in 2005, ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus) in 2010 and Expanded ASEAN Maritime Security Forum (EAMSF) in 2012. Deepening relations between India and Southeast Asia in the second decade/phase was also made evident by India's accession to regional norms of interaction, including the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in 2003, the signing of the "ASEAN-India Partnership of Peace, Progress and Shared Prosperity" in 2004, and the conclusion of a strategic partnership with ASEAN in 2012.⁴⁰ In doing so, interaction with ASEAN had a "socializing effect" on India by reconstituting its interests, identity and foreign policy behaviour.⁴¹

The second phase also witnessed a deepening of economic interactions fueled by the conclusion of a raft of free-trade agreements. At the bilateral level, this began with an early harvest scheme with Thailand in 2004, followed by a more substantive Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement (CECA) with Singapore in 2005 and with Malaysia in 2011. At the multilateral level, a trade in goods agreement was concluded with ASEAN in 2009, made operational for the ASEAN-5 states in 2010 and fully implemented for the remaining states in 2016, with a trade in services and cross-border investments agreement concluded in 2014. Negotiations for a broader Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), comprising the ASEAN+6 countries also began in 2012.

This was complemented by expanded security cooperation in the form of strategic partnerships, defence cooperation agreements, combined military exercises and coordinated patrols (though most these activities took place at the bilateral level). As such, it is apparent that both the substance and momentum of India's engagement with Southeast Asia increased over the course of the second "phase" of the Look East policy.

Moreover, the narrative of economic issues dominating the first phase of the Look East policy may have been used as a rhetorical device by the Indian government to focus engagement with ASEAN in less controversial areas during the earlier stages of the policy. This came as the government sought to downplay concerns that India would bring the baggage of its security issues in South Asia (most notably with Pakistan and China) into Southeast Asia.⁴² This was a prominent concern during the early stages of India's Look East policy when there was an underlying "hesitancy on

the part of Asia-Pacific regional nations and ASEAN countries to look at India on its own merits”.⁴³ This desire to cultivate relations in the less controversial economic arena while adopting a “go-slow” approach on strategic issues accounted for India’s late admittance to forums focused on strategic issues, such as its exclusion from the inaugural meetings of the ARF in 1994 and Asia-Europe Summit (ASEM) in 1996.

Thus, notwithstanding deficiencies —rooted in the false narrative that economic considerations preceded strategic considerations in the origins of the policy, Southeast Asia preceded Northeast Asia in India’s regional engagement and a proclivity to see India’s eastward engagement as a linear progression—the first and second phase in India’s Look East policy generally holds up as a narrative device to capture the evolution of the first two decades of India’s eastward engagement. The same cannot be said however, of the so-called third phase, referred to as the renamed Act East policy.

Phase Three: Act East

The election of Prime Minister Narendra Modi in May 2014 heralded the start of the so-called third “phase” of India’s Look East policy. This was formally announced in November 2014 when Modi unveiled the Act East policy at the 12th ASEAN-India Summit and EAS in Myanmar.⁴⁴ Modi indicated a renewal of India’s external engagement to parallel and complement a renewed domestic reform momentum: “A new era of economic development, industrialization and trade has begun in India. Externally, India’s ‘Look East Policy’ has become ‘Act East Policy’”.⁴⁵ He added that this was “a reflection of the priority that we [India] give to this region”.⁴⁶

Undergirding these developments was a bolder foreign policy, which has been fuelled by the strong mandate of the Modi government, the government’s growth and development-focussed agenda and inherent hawkishness embedded in the ideology of the ruling Hindu-nationalist BJP.⁴⁷ This has resulted in a “renewed energy, vigour, and planning in India’s engagement with the rest of the world” as it becomes a more “confident, articulate, rising power, willing to claim its place on the global high table and able to discharge its responsibilities”, as the Ministry of External Affairs noted in its 2015-16 annual report.⁴⁸

In the context of this bolder and more assertive foreign policy, India’s

extended neighbourhood acquired special attention as the government articulated a “Neighbourhood First” policy, while the government pledged to take a more “integrated and holistic” approach to its regional engagement.⁴⁹ Replacing “Look” with “Act” implied that India would be taking a more pro-active and action-oriented approach towards the region with a “priority on security, connectivity and regional integration”.⁵⁰ In a speech in Singapore in November 2015, Modi noted the “purpose and vigour” with which his government had engaged Asia, adding that, “in the course of the last 18 months, my government has engaged more with this region than any other in the world”.⁵¹ This was also reflected in the establishment of a separate Indian Mission to ASEAN and the EAS in April 2015 with a dedicated ambassador to manage relations based at the ASEAN Secretariat in Jakarta.⁵²

Underlying India’s renewed Act East/Look East policy are the “close linkages” between the country’s foreign policy and “domestic developmental aspirations”.⁵³ This development-driven agenda has placed special emphasis on strengthening connectivity, including infrastructure, people-to-people contacts and trade. This has been evidenced by the establishment of a Joint Task Force on Connectivity to expedite financing for physical and digital infrastructure projects between India and ASEAN.⁵⁴ The focus on connectivity has also been reflected in attempts to facilitate connections between existing regional forums such as the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) that has been promoted as a bridge between ASEAN and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) with the establishment of a Transport Connectivity Working Group in 2016.⁵⁵ There has also been a proposal to institutionalize annual meetings between ASEAN and the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), a regional forum that comprises states bordering the Indian Ocean Region.⁵⁶

Modi has also paid special attention to reaching out to overseas Indian communities.⁵⁷ This is of particular importance to the Act East policy given “the role of the over 6-million strong Indian diaspora in the east in acting as a bridge and platform in developing close partnership with the countries of their adoption, and in the economic development of India”, according to M. Ganapathi, former Indian ambassador and Secretary (West) in the Ministry of External Affairs.⁵⁸ Modi has also sought to strengthen India’s soft-power (cultural) influence in the region through the promotion of Yoga and revival of the ancient Nalanda University.⁵⁹

From a strategic perspective, as India's trade and resource interests have grown, so has the significance of the maritime domain and the need for the Indian Navy to protect these interests.⁶⁰ More than 90 per cent of India's total external trade by volume and 77 per cent by value—accounting for over 40 per cent of the country's GDP—now transits the maritime domain.⁶¹ This includes over 70 per cent of the country's oil imports while more than 50 per cent of India's trade passes through the Straits of Malacca.⁶² As such, as one academic notes, while “in geographical terms India is located outside the South China Sea, in geopolitical and geoeconomic terms India now increasingly operates inside the South China Sea”.⁶³ Moreover, the South China Sea has also acquired added significance as a “maritime gateway” between the Indian Ocean and Western Pacific.⁶⁴ In this context, India has developed a more emphatic position on maintaining freedom of navigation along these strategically vital waterways while calling for the peaceful resolution of maritime territorial and boundary disputes in the region.⁶⁵

The Act East policy has also witnessed a further broadening of its geographic scope amid a growing emphasis on the Indo-Pacific as a new strategic geography for the region. The term “Indo-Asia Pacific” or “Indo-Pacific” in its abbreviated form reflects the growing interconnectedness of South Asia/Indian Ocean and East Asia/Western Pacific as a single strategic system with Southeast Asia/South China Sea at its core.⁶⁶ This new strategic geography also reflects China's and India's growing maritime orientation and their ambitions to project power beyond their respective sub-regions.⁶⁷ In other words, the emergence of the Indo-Pacific as a new geopolitical space is in line with the widening of India's perceived area of strategic influence and reveals the country's emergence as a pan-Asian rather than merely South Asian power.

The growing Pacific orientation of India's Act East policy has been most evident in the country's deepening relations with Japan and Australia. India's relationship with Japan has moved from strength to strength with the conclusion of a “Special Strategic and Global Partnership” between the two sides in September 2014, which notably refers to “Japan's place at the heart of India's Look East Policy”.⁶⁸ With respect to Australia, Raja Mohan notes that “above all, Modi's Act East policy has widened the canvas by putting Australia at the centre of India's eastern strategy and the South Pacific back on India's political radar”.⁶⁹ India's

growing Pacific orientation has also been reflected in the establishment of the India-Pacific Islands Cooperation Forum in November 2014.⁷⁰ There are also indications that the geographic scope of the Act East policy has expanded to include countries in the Indian Ocean Region. For instance, during his visit to Bangladesh in December 2014, Modi noted that “India’s Act East starts with Bangladesh”.⁷¹ This alludes to the government’s focus on improving physical connectivity between India and Southeast Asia and Bangladesh’s geographic position straddling India and Myanmar.

India’s embrace of the Indo-Pacific as the new strategic geography of its Act East policy has also coincided with growing strategic cooperation between India and the United States.⁷² As Modi noted in a speech in January 2015, “When I look towards the East, I see the western shores of the United States. That tells us that we belong to the same vast region.”⁷³ As a result, US-India strategic cooperation has increasingly developed an Indo-Pacific orientation as both countries began working together in addressing developments in Asia.⁷⁴ For instance, the joint statement that was concluded between the two countries in 2015 notes a convergence of India’s Act East policy with the US “pivot” or rebalance towards Asia.⁷⁵ In addition, the Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia Pacific and Indian Ocean has also pledged to develop a roadmap for stepping up bilateral cooperation in several areas related to strengthening the regional architecture.⁷⁶

This strategic alignment has been most evident with respect to developments in the maritime domain. For instance, the joint statement issued following the visit of US President Barack Obama to India in January 2015 made specific reference to “safeguarding maritime security and ensuring freedom of navigation and over flight throughout the region, especially in the South China Sea”.⁷⁷ This shared commitment to a rules-based order in the maritime domain has also been reflected in the conduct of combined naval exercises and patrols, often in coordination with other regional navies.

Challenging Act East

However, despite the hype of India’s Act East policy, claims of a further deepening and broadening of India’s external engagement under its so-called third phase does not hold up to empirical scrutiny. First, one could argue that the expanded geographic scope of the policy was already evident during earlier “phases” of the

policy. For instance, despite claims that India-Japan relations have acquired growing significance under the Act East policy, India had already accelerated economic, political and strategic interactions with Japan during earlier phases of the Look East policy: both countries have been holding annual summit meetings since 2006; concluded a “strategic and global partnership” the same year, leading to the start of a strategic dialogue; and concluded an FTA in 2011, while Japan has long been a leading source of foreign direct investment and overseas development assistance for India.⁷⁸

Similarly, India held its first strategic dialogue with Australia in 2001 and concluded a memorandum of understanding on defence cooperation in 2006 followed by a joint declaration on security cooperation in 2009.⁷⁹ India also concluded a dialogue partnership with the Pacific Islands Forum in 2003. All of these developments preceded the formal launch of the Act East policy, marking the third so-called phase of India’s post-Cold War engagement with Southeast Asia.

Second, despite claims that India’s relations with the region has reached new heights under the Act East policy, the country retains the reputation of being the least consequential of the region’s major powers.⁸⁰ On the economic front, despite claims of pursuing a more economically integrated relationship with the region, as of 2015 India was still only ASEAN’s ninth-largest trading partner, with several much smaller economies having higher trade levels with ASEAN, including Taiwan and Hong Kong.⁸¹ Despite the conclusion of the India-ASEAN FTA, the country has yet to successfully integrate into the region’s manufacturing supply-chains, leading one scholar to proclaim that “in economic terms at least, India is yet to prove that it is a nation of consequence”.⁸² To be sure, there are still hopes that the trade in services agreement with ASEAN that came into force in 2015 will facilitate a strengthening of India’s economic relations with the region, particularly given that India maintains a comparative advantage in service-oriented industries.⁸³

Part of the problem is that India’s Act East policy is contingent on internal economic reforms, which will dictate the pace at which India further integrates with the economies of East Asia. Despite the Modi government projecting a more investor-friendly image, India’s historically protectionist and conservative economic policies remain well-entrenched. Chronic problems of bureaucratic inertia and inter-ministerial coordination and complications associated with forging public-private partnerships and financing remain barriers to accelerating infrastructure connectivity.

For instance, despite rhetoric of developing India's northeast as "India's Gateway to Asia in the 21st century", there have been persistent delays in the completion of two key infrastructure projects: the India (Moreh)-Myanmar (Bagan)-Thailand (Mae Sot) Trilateral Highway (with the goal of eventually extending to Cambodia and Vietnam) and the Kaladan Multi-modal Transit project (connecting the ports of Kolkata and Sittwe).⁸⁴

A similar apprehension can be seen in India's security diplomacy towards the region where there is a continued timidity in the Indian foreign policy establishment towards projecting power beyond its immediate neighbourhood.⁸⁵ This is exacerbated by practical difficulties associated with the slow pace of India's military modernization and the insufficient diplomatic resources deployed to East Asia, with less than 15 per cent of officers at the headquarters of the Ministry of External Affairs covering the region.⁸⁶

The Look East/Act East policy has also been "crowded out" to some extent by an increasingly bold and assertive foreign policy by other regional powers. This includes China's "One Belt, One Road" initiative, the United States' pivot towards Asia (although there are questions over whether this will be sustained under the administration of President Donald Trump) and renewed efforts by Japan to engage with the region through such initiatives as Shinzo Abe's "Democratic Security Diamond" and a "China Plus One" strategy of diversifying foreign investment (most notably in Southeast Asia).⁸⁷

Adopting an increasingly expansive strategic geography stretching from the Indian Ocean Region to the Pacific also reveals a potential risk to the Act East policy as it becomes too broad and all-encompassing without a clear geographic or strategic focus. This could also serve to dilute the principle of "ASEAN centrality" that has traditionally formed the bedrock of the Look East policy.⁸⁸ To be sure, official discourse continues to pay lip service to ASEAN centrality as a core principle of India's Act East policy.⁸⁹ However, India's participation in a growing plethora of "mini-lateral" or trilateral groupings that exclude ASEAN alludes to the possibility that New Delhi's policy of eastward engagement may gradually transcend ASEAN. These include a trilateral ministerial dialogue between India, Japan and the United States, which was upgraded to the level of foreign ministers in September 2015; an inaugural foreign secretary-level trilateral dialogue between Australia, India and Japan in June 2015; an India-Australia-Indonesia Trilateral Dialogue on the Indian

Ocean; a track II-level dialogue between India, Japan and South Korea; track 1.5-level dialogue between the United States, China and India; and the conclusion of a trilateral cooperation agreement among India, Japan and Vietnam in December 2014.⁹⁰ These initiatives reflect a broader inclination by regional powers to no longer anchor their security to ASEAN.

As such, the jury is still out over whether there have been any real substantive changes to mark this new “phase” of India’s Look East policy, aside from it being rebranded as the Act East policy. Key elements of the Act East policy—including its broader strategic geography encompassing countries such as Japan and Australia and its development-driven and strategically-oriented approach—were already evident during earlier periods of India’s eastward engagement. Moreover, expanding the strategic geography of the policy to embrace the broader Indo-Pacific region has introduced challenges and ambiguities amid concerns that it will become too broad while diluting the policy’s traditional focus on ASEAN centrality. Several scholars have echoed these views, noting “scepticism about Delhi’s ability to convert words into deeds”, as well as questioning if Act East has been “largely rhetorical” and “a mere effort at rebranding”.⁹¹ In this context, the Act East policy remains a work in progress that still needs to be clearly defined.

Conclusions

This article has sought to deconstruct the delineation of India’s Look East policy into various phases to establish whether the substance of India’s re-engagement with Southeast Asia in the post-Cold War period matches the rhetoric of the policy. What is revealed here is that although there is some evidence to posit a qualitative change between the various so-called phases of the Look East policy, the narrative of distinct phases is not as definite or clear-cut as the literature represents it to be. This speaks to the fact that much of the rhetoric regarding the Look East policy is aspirational rather than a reflection of the reality of India’s post-Cold War engagement with Southeast Asia. In this context, the launch of each phase often serves as a rebranding exercise as a new government seeks to differentiate its foreign policy approach from that of its predecessor.

According to the official narrative, the geographic and functional scope of the

Look East policy has expanded in moving from one phase to the next. India has made a concerted effort to expand beyond, while consolidating, engagement in the economic domain to more strategic-level interactions. It has also sought to expand beyond, and consolidate further, its interaction with Southeast Asia to strengthen engagement with the broader East Asian and then Indo-Pacific region.

With respect to the expanding geographic scope, from the inception of the Look East policy in the early 1990s to the completion of phase one in the early 2000s, the key development was the expansion of ASEAN to include the CLMV states in the Mekong sub-region. This expanded the focus of India's Look East policy from the original six members of ASEAN to the expanded 10-member organization, which now included one state that shares a land border with India (Myanmar) and another with which India has maintained long-standing and close relations (Vietnam), the same country that historically had also been a thorn in the India-ASEAN relationship. In shifting from phase one to phase two the geographic scope of the policy was further expanded to include the broader East Asia region. Finally, in shifting from phase two to a nascent phase three of a renamed Act East policy in 2014, the geographic scope of the policy is undergoing further revisions as the Indo-Pacific has increasingly replaced East Asia as the strategic geography of the policy.

In reality, this shift has not been so clear-cut, as evidenced by the fact that a broader East Asia and Asia-Pacific orientation was evident from the very inception of the policy. However, India lacked the capability to project power in the initial stages of the policy, resulting in a primary focus on Southeast Asia. Moreover, while ASEAN centrality has remained a core principle of the policy, there are latent concerns over whether this will be sustained in the context of the expanding strategic geography of the region. Notably, in expanding the geographic scope of the policy to a broader Indo-Pacific orientation, there is a risk that the policy will become too broad and lose strategic focus as it accommodates a growing number of countries from the Indian Ocean to the Pacific. This shows that the "broadening" geographic scope of the Act East policy remains a work in progress.

The expanding functional scope of the Look East/Act East policy is also open to scrutiny. Claims that the policy was largely driven by economic considerations during its inception with political and security considerations only gaining significance during the latter phases of the policy have been challenged by the fact that strategic factors were at the heart of the policy from its very inception. However,

this narrative is to some extent vindicated by the fact that India sought to focus engagement with ASEAN in less controversial economic areas during the earlier stages of the policy in order to alleviate concerns that it would bring the baggage of its security concerns in South Asia into Southeast Asia.⁹²

Focussing on the most recent Act East policy that began under the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the jury is still out over whether the policy offers anything new, with evidence that its expanded geographic focus and its bolder and more assertive process of engagement was already evident during earlier phases of the policy. As such, despite rhetoric of moving from “looking” to “acting” east and efforts by the Modi government to strengthen regional connectivity and address regulatory and infrastructure bottlenecks to create a more investor-friendly environment, India still has a long way to go in escaping the reputation of being the least consequential major power for Southeast Asia.

To be sure, these deficiencies do not diminish the relevance of the Look East policy. India’s interactions with Southeast Asia have grown leaps and bounds since the launch of the Look East policy in the early 1990s. Following a short-lived effort to build an Asian community of nations in the 1950s, benign neglect took over in the 1960s and 1970s. The India-ASEAN relationship then underwent a rapid deterioration in the late 1970s and 1980s amid concerns over India’s support for Vietnam following its invasion of Kampuchea (Cambodia) in 1978. This was exacerbated by fears of an alleged India-Soviet-Vietnam axis and the implications of India’s naval modernization efforts.

However, since the launch of the Look East policy in the 1990s, the perception of India as a threat to regional stability has not only dissipated but been replaced by a view of the country as a stabilizing force in the region. Moreover, from viewing India as a distant and disconnected power, it is now seen as an integral participant in the regional security architecture. As such, when benchmarked against other major powers in the region, India may still be regarded as a relatively peripheral player; but when judged on its own merits—both relative to its interaction with other regions in India’s extended neighbourhood and its historical interaction with Southeast Asia—India’s regional engagement has gained significant substance and momentum since the launch of the Look East policy.⁹³

To conclude, the concept of phases in India’s Look East policy is open to

scrutiny given that India's engagement with its eastern neighbours has not been a process of simple linear progression, instead going through a more cyclical process of peaks and troughs. Moreover, elements of the so-called later phases were already present during the earlier phases, as demonstrated by strategic considerations, security cooperation and a broader geographic scope being at the heart of the policy from its very inception. As such, while the concept of phases in India's Look East policy serves as a useful narrative device for understanding the general progression of India's eastward engagement since the early 1990s, it does not capture the nuances of India's post-Cold War relationship with Southeast Asia, which has been far more complex than this narrative suggests.

NOTES

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⁸⁹ In unveiling the Act East policy in November 2014, Prime Minister Modi noted that "we look at ASEAN, not only for inspiration but also for its leadership". "India, ASEAN can be great partners: Modi", *Hindustan Times*, 12 November 2014, available at <<http://www.hindustantimes.com/india/india-asean-can-be-great-partners-modi/story-EvYECobHDArNyyS4TUFBgP.html>>. During a speech in Singapore in 2015, Modi also noted that "ASEAN is the anchor of our Act East policy." Narendra Modi, "India's Singapore Story" Singapore Lecture, Singapore, 23 November 2015. Also see: MEA, *Annual Report 2013-14*, op. cit., p.ii; MEA, *Annual Report 2014-15*, op. cit., pp.xvi; MEA, *Annual Report 2015-16*, op. cit., pp.x, 39.

⁹⁰ Chaturvedy, "South China Sea", op. cit., pp.371-3; Prashanth Parameswaran, "Why the 'New' US Trilateral Dialogue With Japan and India Matters", *The Diplomat* (1 October 2015), available at <<http://thediplomat.com/2015/10/why-the-new-us-trilateral-dialogue-with-japan-and-india-matters/>>; MEA, *Annual Report 2014-15*, op. cit., p.23; MEA, *Annual Report 2015-16*, op. cit., pp.25, 44, 203.

⁹¹ C. Raja Mohan, "Not so easy to Act East", *The Indian Express*, 22 November 2014, available at <<http://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/not-so-easy-to-act-east/>>; Jabin Jacob, "Role of Major Powers in the Indo-Pacific Region", and Dinesh Yadav, "'Look East' to 'Act East'", in *India and China*, op. cit., pp.87, 52.

⁹² Sridharan, *The ASEAN Region in India's Foreign Policy*, op. cit., p.232. Also see Dixit, *My South Block Years*, op. cit., p.265.

⁹³ Scott, "India's 'Extended Neighborhood' Concept", op. cit., p.139; "India to Adopt 'Look West Asia' Policy", *People's Daily*, 24 August 2005; Jyoti Prasad Das, "India's 'Connect Central Asia' Policy", *Foreign Policy Journal* (29 October 2012), available at <<http://www.foreignpolicyjournal.com/2012/10/29/indias-connect-central-asia-policy/>>.